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General debate on national experience in population matters: fertility, reproductive health and development

Statement submitted by Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

Women's Health and Human Rights

The Case for Comprehensive and Sustainable Development

1. The focus of this session of the Commission on Population and Development on fertility, reproductive health and development is timely. While there have been many effective interventions addressing single issues such as women's incidence of HIV/AIDS, maternal mortality and reproductive rights, the single-issue approach has not strengthened societal and political will to address women's health, nor has it created the conditions in which women can make decisions about reproduction and become the protagonists of their own development. In this contribution to the Commission, we aim to address the need to transition to a more comprehensive approach to addressing women's reproductive health and human rights. We do so guided by the understanding that the ultimate aim is not only to enable women to participate fully in the affairs of society within the present social order. Rather, women must be enabled to work shoulder to shoulder with men to construct a new social order characterized by justice, peace and collective prosperity.

2. When viewed in its broader context, the discrimination against women is one of many symptoms of an ailing society. Individuals and groups compete with one another in pursuit of narrow self-interests; insecurity and violence are commonplace. For the most part, social institutions, structures, and processes have not been set up in ways that effectively serve the common good and when people attempt to work within these systems to advance the common good they often face systemic constraints or outright political challenges. What is needed is a profound questioning of the assumptions underpinning the social systems and world views that enable and perpetuate these conditions. Otherwise the betterment of humankind and the advancement of civilization in both its spiritual and material dimensions will continue to elude humanity's best efforts.

3. A just and equitable social order can be characterized by an ethic of reciprocity — an understanding that the interests of the individual and of the wider community are inextricably linked. The human body provides a relevant analogy. Within this system, millions of cells collaborate to make human life possible; the diversity of form and function connects them in a lifelong process of giving and receiving. Much like the parts of a human body, human communities are interdependent entities; the discrimination against women and girls often accompanies other social ills and can be an indicator of wide-scale social decay.

4. Social problems commonly manifest themselves in health-related issues, such as domestic violence, fistula or malnutrition. As such, health care can serve as an important entry point for addressing the well-being — both physical and spiritual — of a community. By engaging in a dialogue with women and their families, health-care providers have the opportunity to understand better the structural, economic, cultural or legal problems faced by families and can begin to consider how their services can be rendered in a way that empowers women and their families to be the protagonists of their development.

* The present statement is being issued without formal editing.

5. The reproductive role of women places them at a particular risk for sexually transmitted diseases, sexual assault, and mortality and morbidity related to pregnancy and childbirth.

6. The following statistics highlight the conditions of risk for many women and girls:

- Fifty per cent of pregnancies worldwide are unwanted; a lack of self-empowerment and systemic sexual discrimination place women at tremendous risk. A pregnancy, especially when it is unwanted or occurs during the teenage years, places girls and young women at risk for further economic isolation, reduces her access to education, and creates a cycle of dependency.
- One out of three women is assaulted during her lifetime. The epidemics of sex slavery and human trafficking persist worldwide, with devastating consequences for the victims and their families.
- Over 20 million women are infected with HIV/AIDS, placing their born and unborn children at great risk.
- The World Health Organization estimates that 550,000 women die in childbirth each year — one maternal death every minute. In non-industrialized countries, ten times as many women suffer severe consequences during childbirth, as compared to women in industrialized countries.

7. Fertility and reproductive health, with their effects on development, are a piece of a greater puzzle. The manifold and exponential effects, which result from the denial of the rights of girls and women, can have dire consequences. The international community as well as communities at the local and national level must now address the broader conditions, which allow for such rights to be denied. It is not only a question of changing attitudes but also structures — structures which exist at the level of laws, regulations and policies but which are also social, cultural and mental.

8. Ultimately, it is imperative to address women's rights in a manner that recognizes the woman's full role in society and fosters her sense of self-worth as well as the intrinsic nobility of every woman, man and child. Many agencies and institutions involved in this work are beginning to recognize that without a comprehensive approach to women's rights, their efforts may prove ineffective or unsustainable. A literate woman is more likely to make better health decisions. It has been shown that one to three years of a mothers' schooling can decrease children's mortality rate by 15 per cent. An economically sustained woman will have a greater ability to avoid sex trafficking and slavery. Women in good health have the opportunity to pursue educational and economic opportunities and to contribute more fully to the betterment of society.

9. Boys born into such environments are also the beneficiaries. With educated and healthy mothers comes a reduced risk of involvement in sexual crimes and other offences as youth and adults. As women are the first educators of their children, young boys will be more likely to reap the benefits of literacy, economic opportunity, and good health as well. This cycle will be reinforcing, resulting in a tipping point at which the society will no longer tolerate the oppression of its girls and women.

10. While there are, of course, many other challenges, we hope that a greater awareness of the relationships between women's health and her development as well as that of her family and community will contribute to the discussions of the Commission and will help to link the discussions to the broader aim of constructing a social order governed by the principles of justice and equity.

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